Teaching practice in the making: Shaping and reshaping the field of adult language, literacy and numeracy teaching

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The field of adult language, literacy and numeracy in Australia is a site of struggle as policy changes, new learner groups and new economic imperatives challenge teachers' expertise and beliefs about good teaching practice. This article examines the ways in which experienced adult language, literacy and numeracy teachers shape and reshape their practices within this tricky and treacherous terrain. Using Bourdieu's analytical tools of field and habitus as a theoretical framework, and Kumaravadivelu's notion of post-method pedagogy as a lens for observation and interpretation, the paper analyses the ways in which four experienced teachers shape and reshape their classroom practice to create transformative learning for their learners.

Introduction

This paper looks at a much examined, historical practice—teaching. Specifically, we seek to explore how expert teachers of adult language, literacy and numeracy continue to learn their practice. Teaching practice is a slippery term: on one level, it may be seen as a mechanistic or prescriptive action, on another, it is taking up the role as a facilitator, and on yet another level, it is an eclectic blend of different approaches. How do teachers navigate across the tricky and treacherous terrain of an arguably much maligned practice? The setting of our study is the adult language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) classroom. Our interest is in the way teaching practice shapes and is shaped by: the particularities of the social space of the classroom, the participants (teachers and learners), the external social and political context, and the teachers' and learners' interaction with the external world, and how this shaping and reshaping creates possibilities of transformative learning for the participants.

The teachers whose practice we examine are highly experienced and have university degree qualifications in a relevant discipline. They are part of the generation of Australian adult LLN teachers who were a component of the professionalisation of a previously more loosely organised and structured field (Scheeres 1993; Black 1992). They would be described as 'expert teachers' using the three dimensions of the expert teacher identified by Tsui (2009:424). Firstly, they demonstrate capabilities to integrate various aspects of knowledge in relation to the teaching act; secondly, they relate to their contexts of work and their understanding of teaching so constituted; and thirdly, they exercise their capabilities to engage in reflection and conscious deliberation.

In an examination of how expert teachers continue to learn their practice, we cannot help but look at the power relations within the teaching field and the ways in which legitimacy is bestowed on certain kinds of knowledge (meeting systems requirements and vocationally

focused courses) and practices (approaches to teaching and modes of work).

Priya, an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher team-teaching in a Vocational Education and Training (VET) program, is highly attuned to the changes in the field of LLN. While she spoke to us about the strangeness and newness of working in a more subordinated position as a language support teacher to the now more valued vocationally focused program, she demonstrated her capacity to embrace this change. Peter and Jean are also team-teaching, but in a vastly different program, working with young people excluded from school and work. Ann is a literacy and numeracy teacher in a further education college and her adult learners are struggling to learn concepts and skills they missed at school. These teachers described the dynamics of the field, the relations between and across the dispositions they as teachers carried with (in) them, the valued stakes—in these cases—the credentials that the participants were working towards, and the emerging practices of both the teachers and the students.

The above snapshots of changing/learning practices appear painless when observing the teachers in their classrooms; yet the teaching field is a highly contested and uncertain arena. Teachers are engaged in a struggle over the scarce intellectual resources in the field, that is, legitimacy in terms of voice and participation, intellectual and academic credibility, economic stakes and educational resources. The struggles the teachers in this study engage in are both internal and external to the classroom. On the one hand, a key issue is that of the ways in which professional expertise, that is, intellectual or knowledge capital (or in Bourdieu's (1992) terms, symbolic capital) is accumulated. The teachers' expertise is recognised from within the field; they were highly recommended by their professional colleagues. However, the field is changing and there are credentials that are required by policy that have little perceived value by experienced

teachers themselves (for example, a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment that is mandated in VET policy). On the other hand, there is the struggle to maintain and strengthen the particularity of the teaching, to keep the learners in a pivotal position.

We examine this field of practice with the help of Bourdieu's heuristic devices of field, capital and habitus (these concepts are described in more detail in the next section) and Kumaravadivelu's notion of teacher's sense-making, that is, the way teachers reflect the relationship between theory and practice in practical ways through their pedagogy. Central to our analysis are the ways in which teachers shape their practices by negotiating, managing and sustaining the interrelationship of student agency and teacher contingency (Baynham 2006). We focus on the four experienced and expert LLN teachers mentioned above to understand the ways their teaching practices are enacted. This is a timely investigation, because in Australia where this study is located, there is a significant impetus for reform in workforce development of the vocational education and training workforce (Productivity Commission 2011; Wheelahan & Moodie 2010), and a new national strategy for adult literacy and numeracy is in the making (Foundation Skills Working Group Secretariat 2011). This comes after more than a decade of waiting for a new policy (Castleton, Sanguinetti & Falk 2001; Black & Yasukawa 2010). However, the reforms need to be informed by studies such as this that examine the ways teachers' interpretations of the policies in their practices are shaped and reshaped by a number of variables, including their beliefs about teaching, the theories that inform their teaching, their interests in the field, and most of all the relationships between themselves and their learners.

As demonstrated above, the inhabitants (or agents) of the teaching fields we explore here are a diverse group of expert teachers in an equally diverse range of settings: an adult numeracy class in a further education college, an English language course integrated

into a vocational education program with recently arrived migrants from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and a program for re-engaging young learners who had dropped out of school. Our initial work with these teachers gathered interview and video data on effective adult language, literacy and numeracy teaching (Widin, Yasukawa & Chodkiewicz 2008; Chodkiewicz, Widin & Yasukawa 2010). This data set is rich in portraying an array of highly contextualised and contingent teaching practice along with the teachers' stories about their practices. While learners' voices were necessarily part of our research data, this article focuses on the teachers and their negotiation of their practice.

We, the writers, are also positioned within the field; two of us are teacher educators in the ESOL and Literacy and Numeracy field, and one is a researcher with a long history of researching within community-based linguistic and culturally diverse educational settings.

A framework for analysing teaching practices

Teaching practice is complex, as mentioned earlier. It can be seen as a collection of mechanistic skills or at another extreme as a highly contextualised and nuanced socio-cultural activity (Cross 2010), with many variations between. We ventured into this territory understanding some of its complexity and feel that Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' are useful, explanatory devices for what is evident in the field. Bourdieu sees practice as a result of the interplay between three dimensions: field, capital and habitus. The field here is the teaching space, although the boundaries are not set; they shift according to the relationship with the field of power and other related fields. Capital (the valued resources in the field) is both symbolic and material. In the LLN field, the valued resources include funding, qualifications, language skills, experience and professional networks. Habitus is a way of discussing the deep embodied tacit

understandings, the dispositions, of the agent in a particular field. Bourdieu describes habitus as more an acquired sense of when and how to use cultural knowledge in a profitable manner, rather than as a set of propositions, beliefs or adherence to rules. He (1992: 184) writes that 'practice is the product of the habitus, which is itself the product of the embodiment of the immanent regularities and tendencies of the world'. The teachers' dispositions, which derive in part from their lived experiences and their own social and cultural history, form their personal narratives (Cross 2010). All inform and influence their practice.

Bourdieu's work is of particular value in examining a teaching context and practice. His central concerns rest on the notion of relational practice, the relationship between the three 'thinking tools' outlined above. Teaching exemplifies this relationship between the social structures and the individual participants who continually shape and reshape each other according to the accumulation of the valued resources and relations of power. Bourdieu's analytical tools help to make visible the invisible relations of power and to unearth those 'naturally' occurring regularities that become known as 'the norm'. This study of teachers in the adult LLN field endeavours to uncover the invisible webs of dominant and subordinate relationships which cause the practices to be carried out in a certain way. Given that the field of publically-funded, adult LLN education is wrought with struggles around funding, qualifications, intellectual legitimacy and public perceptions of teachers and teaching practices, in particular the on-going devaluing and de-professionalisation of teachers' practices (Black 2010), Bourdieu's concepts allow us to understand how this socially important endeavour changes and endures.

In a field, inhabited by powerful artefacts and participants as alluded to above, teachers are most often beholden to the 'doxa', that is, the dominant set of beliefs and values of the field. In Bourdieu's (1998: 57) words, this is 'a particular point of view, the point of view

of the dominant'. In the adult LLN field the doxa is represented by the funding policies and curriculum and it is unlikely that classroom teachers' (localised) knowledge or practices can change the structure of dominant practices and legitimate knowledge (Bourdieu & Eagleton 1992: 119). An issue of great interest in this study is how the teachers are able to comply with the dominant view projected by their institutions, while at the same time practise in ways that recognise their unique situation. The range of 'knowledges' accumulated by the teachers in our study come from their ability to attend to the particularities of their teaching context and to be open to adapt and change (learn) their practices which are conceived and developed through their own sense making (Kumaravadivelu 2003). But how is this learning recognised and valued?

Bourdieu provides the relational framework to examine the power relations and features of the field, while Kumaravadivelu (2003) offers us a way to examine teacher learning at the level of the classroom and interactions with the students. His framework for teacher development contests the traditional notion of locating teacher 'training' within the master-apprenticeship model and the transmission of knowledge as a key teaching approach. He puts forward an approach which equips teachers with the resources to devise a personal theory of practice based on an hermeneutic principle of 'situational understanding', that is, that all pedagogy is local and teachers must be aware of local exigencies which impact on their teaching. He is centrally concerned about the 'once-and-for-all set of authorized practices' (McMorrow 2007: 375) that some teachers take away from teacher training programs; for many teachers, these set up a framework of the way to engage in any further professional development and build (or not) relationships with their students. These 'authorised practices' often take the form of a particular teaching methodology.

Kumaravadivelu's (2003) 'postmethod pedagogy' dispenses with the idea that there is a teaching method that will suit all contexts at all times. His broader teacher development framework rests on three pedagogic parameters: particularity, practicality and possibility. The parameter of particularity takes into account the particular needs and particular context of the learners when making decisions about how and what to teach. That of practicality recognises and acknowledges the teacher's sense-making, that is, the teacher-generated theory of practice which informs and is informed by teaching. This sense-making sees the classroom walls as permeable; the learners are situated within the context that exists outside of the classroom. The third parameter of possibility takes account of the socio-political world and is the dimension which is concerned with identity and social transformation. The teacher cannot fulfil their pedagogic obligations without at the same time fulfilling their social obligations. They must be aware of both the socio-political and cultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform their own and their students' realities.

Kumaravadivelu's parameters are interwoven and overlap; they each shape and are shaped by the other (2003: 34–36). These parameters assist us to analyse and discuss the struggles and tensions in the teaching field and how they shape (reshape) teaching practice. It is clear that all the teachers in this study intuitively operated from within the three dimensions of Kumaravadivelu's framework. Our brief introduction of Priya above shows how she operated from the particularities and practicalities of her teaching context; further on, we examine the possibilities. What are the valued resources that Priya has accumulated in the field? How do they enable her to shape and reshape her practice? What other resources come into play? Baynham (2006) provides a complementary analytical tool in his examination of the ways teachers bring in, negotiate and mediate the learners' external worlds. He uses the terms student agency and

teacher contingency to describe the way teachers are able to identify and respond to the student 'irruptions' (Baynham 2006); these allow teachers to open up the learning space, inviting 'irregular artefacts' into the classroom and reshaping the teaching practices.

All of the teachers in this study had developed considerable cultural capital (qualifications, professional development) to draw on from the disciplinary knowledge that they gained in their formal study, as well as their knowledge and ways of navigating through the official institutional, policy and curriculum requirements. But what all the teachers said they valued and relied upon most was their knowledge and experience of dialogic approaches to learning, in order to respond in contingent and practical ways to the needs of their learners as they arose. This was exemplified through their willingness to use what the learners brought from their worlds of work, community and home as teachable moments in their classes, or in exercising timely and spontaneous division of labour with the team teacher in response to unexpected situations.

The willingness and skills of the teachers to respond to the particularities of the situations in practical ways was also seen to lead to creating new possibilities for both the learners and the teachers themselves. In a Bourdieuian sense, the teachers are attempting to counter the symbolic violence inherent in any teaching situation. Symbolic violence is described as being carried out by imposing meanings as 'legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force' and at the same time communicating a logic or rhetoric of disinterest (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977: 4). Therefore, when teachers teach English or are taught to teach English, they are fundamentally trying to impose 'culturally arbitrary' conditions by an arbitrary power (p.18) under the guise of legitimate order. Later in this paper, we give an opportunity for the teachers to speak about how their practices continually evolve and transform, and in turn transpose, in some cases, their teacher dispositions.

Learning in a changing field

Our inquiry here focuses on how teaching practice is shaped and in turn shapes the field. Current research which investigates how language, literacy and numeracy teachers learn their practice often focuses on the teacher's prior beliefs, the teacher's course work (teacher training) and field experience; and what teachers do during their first years of teaching (Morton, McGuire & Baynham 2006). Research on teacher learning is also divided into two major research fields (Richards & Placier 2001): the first has a focus on the individual teacher learning, and the second focuses on the school as a context for teaching and learning. These two fields of research are most often kept separate, and so far the research does not show how they interrelate (Hoesktra et al. 2009), whereas in our current study these two fields are seen together, involved in a dynamic relationship. Hoesktra et al. (2009: 280) draw attention to whether the 'conditions for learning' are available to teachers in their workplaces and that teachers' perceptions of learning are contingent on conditions such as teacher status, teacher autonomy, teacher collaboration, reflective dialogue, receiving feedback and experience of shared norms and responsibility in the teaching site.

Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009) identify four aspects of the current orthodoxies in Australian education including the rise of audit cultures, the standardisation of practice, the diminishment of teacher professional judgment, and the 'quality' agenda in education. In the field of adult literacy and numeracy, Tusting (2009) examines the struggles teachers in the UK experience in a field similarly characterised by these orthodoxies, while in Australia Black (2010) focuses on the phenomenon of the rising 'audit cultures' and examines the different ways in which Australian teachers are responding to increasing pressures for compliance in areas such as curriculum development and assessment, aspects of their work on

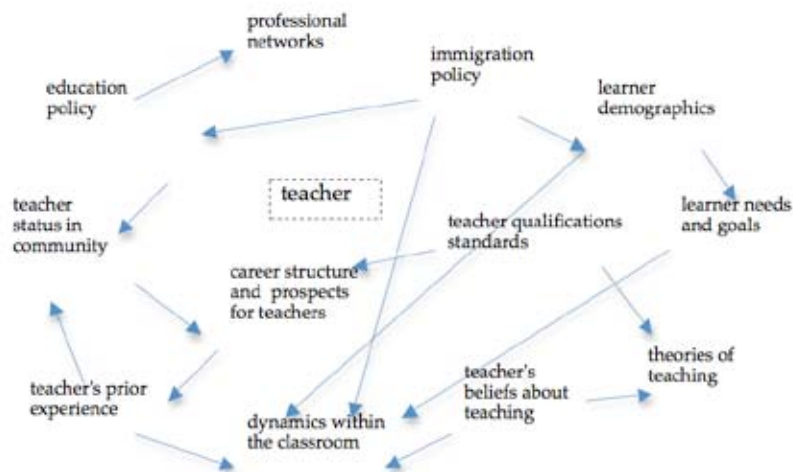which teachers in the past were able to exercise greater professional judgement and autonomy.

Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009: 136–7) propose different models of practitioner-based inquiry as ways in which teachers can make sense of the orthodoxies and 'close the gap' between their own 'moral authority and moral agency' and the external pressures imposed upon them. However, as Hoekstra et al. (2009) point out, variables such as teachers' employment security and the culture of the workplace in which they are located can significantly limit the influence and the possibilities of such forms of professional learning. In light of these observations, the ways in which the teachers in our study make sense of their complex terrains seem even more remarkable.

In their research on change and teaching practices in the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) field, Burns and de Silva Joyce (2007) posit the curriculum as the artefact which shapes and reshapes LLN teaching practices. This artefact is the realisation of struggles within government policy, ideology, legitimation of knowledge and positioning of the learners and teachers. The curriculum has taken many forms over the last four decades in Australia—from text-book to skeletal outlines to detailed specifications that focus particularly on externally-validated assessment.

The above research points to significant features of the adult LLN field as a broad entity; within the classrooms studied here, key features interact and help to shape teaching practice. They include teacher's beliefs, their training and experience, the context of the teachers' work, and the curriculum. These features are often seen to operate as single elements in the field, and not necessarily as dynamics or as 'shifting variables' as they often are.

The concept of 'figured worlds' (Holland & Bartlett 2002; Baynham 2006) is useful here to refer to the classrooms. These worlds exist within a field and they are constructed and populated by agents and artefacts that, through their interactions, invoke practice. Artefacts have the possibility of being fleeting (for example, spoken language) or long-lasting (for example, teaching resources). Student irruptions can be viewed as a transient artefact, but they are artefacts that together with teacher contingency can become a powerful force in shaping practice. We conceptualise the LLN field (both the classroom and the broader field) as a complex entity with sets of both competing and contrasting forces and interests. Figure 1 displays the variables, including the agents and artefacts in the teaching space.

Figure 1: Conceptualising the LLN field

It is difficult to capture the position of the variables and the way they shift in a two dimensional diagram. However, this multifaceted, though not exhaustive, map provides some insight into the complexity of the field and the influences and forces which act upon the teacher and which the teacher in turn acts upon. We have not mapped the

field in a manner that is similar to Bourdieu—this is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the figure is an attempt to show that teaching practice is not an isolated or neutral act. In fact, it is a dimension of this particular field and teachers are beholden to changes in the field and subsequently 'learn new practice' in ways that are sometimes difficult to name. We do not claim to capture all the elements of the field, of which teaching, from another research perspective, may also be an element. The elements in Figure 1 are not static; they are impacted and influenced by the shifting dynamics and boundaries of other fields. Policy is a significant artefact in this field, a key 'socio-cultural tool' (Cross 2010: 441) that is in play with the social activities within the 'cultural-historic domain' (Cross 2010: 441); policies influence the way teachers do what they do. Clearly, changes within institutions resulting from policy changes, such as a shift from an access and general education focus to a more vocational education and training focus due to broader labour market shifts, mean that teachers have to learn continually how to work with new learners with previously unfamiliar cultural, linguistic and/or educational settings and goals. Our analysis of this field aims, as stated earlier, to make these forces of change visible. The teachers in our study show how they navigate their ever-changing terrain and how their practices shift with the boundaries of the field.

The agents in the field

Figure 1 shows that the teachers whom we are studying are situated in a dynamic field and are creating and renewing their practice within a particular policy context, bringing with them their particular dispositions, their histories and beliefs about what it means to be a teacher, and what LLN learning can mean for the learners with whom they work.

The current picture of the field, one that is dominated by discourses of competencies and outcomes, accountability audits, employability

and credentials, is in sharp contrast to the ways of working that many of these teachers first encountered in the field when Adult Basic Education (ABE) and English language education 'felt like a grassroots movement—a band of people working together towards a common good' (NSWALNC 2009: 28). The field is now far from what could be called a grassroots movement. LLN teachers' professional autonomy is challenged by a culture of internal and external audits that legitimise teacher compliance over agency (Black 2010). The curriculum that was in the past a process of negotiation between the learners and the teacher has increasingly become a 'product' based on units of externally determined competencies and outcomes emphasising vocational and employment outcomes. As mentioned earlier in this paper, curriculum is often seen as the driver of change and teacher learning; however, as we demonstrate, the field is complicated and, while curriculum is a powerful element, it is mediated by the dispositions that teachers bring to and take on in the field. For example, when a 'national snapshot' of the adult literacy and numeracy field was taken in 2001, it was found that teachers held strongly to a view of literacy as 'a fundamental human right and a means of empowerment for individuals' (McGuirk 2001: 3). Many teachers continue to find ways to create meaningful learning for their learners with the diminishing degree of autonomy they have (Yasukawa 2008).

An overarching feature of this dynamic field is how the teachers' and learners' dispositions transpose in relation to the shifts in the valued stakes (capital). Clearly, the teachers and learners take on the doxa of the field: vocational outcomes, certification/credentialing, and movement between types of provision for specific purposes. What do these teachers retain and sustain across these changes in the valued capital? Our study shows that the teachers' core values and beliefs around the particularities of the learners and the teaching sites and their continued sense-making (learning), the practicality and their opportunities to open up possibilities were the key

sustainable elements; they exhibit in the practice the parameters of what Kumaravadivelu calls 'post-method pedagogy' (2003: 23). In the following sections, we examine the teachers' practices through this lens.

A practice of continual renewal and reshaping

A strong, common theme emerged in our interviews and observations of the experienced teachers in this study—an ESOL teacher on a VET program, two teachers team teaching with young people who had dropped out of school, and a literacy and numeracy teacher in a technical college. Although expressed in slightly different language, in response to the question of what makes good practice in adult LLN/ ESOL, all of these teachers spoke about particularity, the establishment of a productive and inclusive relationship with their learners as the primary concern and aim of their practice. None of the teachers referred to any specific method or theory as defining or determining their practice. Using the words of Noddings (2003: 249), these teachers saw teaching as a 'relational practice', that is:

> Teaching is thoroughly relational, and many of its goods are relational: the feeling of safety in a thoughtful teacher's classroom, a growing intellectual enthusiasm in both teacher and student, the challenge and satisfaction sacred by both in engaging new material, the awakening sense (for both) that teaching and life are never-ending moral quests.

However, the relational practice for these teachers is not a-theoretical or arbitrary. Our data provide evidence of these teachers' practice as being formed, reformed and challenged by differing accumulations of capital and interactions with the habitus in the field.

The aspect of responding to the particularity of the policy and learner contexts was exhibited in different ways in the three sites. Overall, a striking characteristic of the teachers was the way their habitus had become finely attuned to the stakes (valued capital) of the field to

operate strategically. Priya found herself working in the increasingly vocationally-focused environment where language and literacy teaching and learning was integrated into the teaching of vocational knowledge and skills. Priya's habitus has clearly been one of an ESOL teacher; the changes in the field meant that she had to learn new ways of working. Previously she taught alone, focusing on general English language skills and knowledge; in this new role, she was positioned as a learner support teacher, team-teaching with the vocational teacher in an accredited vocational course. Peter and Jean were learning to work with people who are often spoken about as 'at risk' students in a community youth centre. Here the learning also involved team-teaching as a way to provide greater degrees of responsiveness to learners with multiple learning needs, and working with volunteers who provided further support and enabled each learner's individual goals to be negotiated and achieved. At the third site, Ann was clear in her philosophy of teaching. She showed that teaching was about knowing and responding to learners' individual goals and needs. What was specified in the syllabus was important, but it had to be balanced against the needs and abilities of the learners. In all three sites, the teachers demonstrated how they were attuned to the changing circumstances of their learners, and how they gained a sense of the game, or in other words, a sense of (a particular) reality.

What follows are some selected observations from the three sites to illustrate the manifestations of the aspects of particularity, practicality and possibilities in the teachers' pedagogy. We also point to the ways the teachers act contingently by bringing in the learners' external worlds and encouraging student agency.

Reshaping habitus in a VET classroom

The first site that we studied was at a community college where Priya, an ESOL teacher, was team-teaching with Amy, a vocational teacher in the children's services course. Their students were recently arrived young migrant women who were studying towards a vocational

qualification in children's services. Although Priya had many years of experience as an ESOL teacher, working in several different countries with students from diverse cultures, her team-teaching with Amy involved a process of learning a new teaching practice. This practice reflected both the current policy focus on LLN providers forming partnerships with VET providers, community services and industry, and on supporting the integrated development of LLN skills within VET programs. Both teachers saw the value of working together as a way of supporting the students' learning:

> Both of us have been able to work well as a team I think because both of us have a great passion for helping our students ... and both of us have a common goal... It's taken a lot of trial and error for me because it was one of the first courses where I was team-teaching, but I think at the end of it I can see that it's been really valuable ... it's been really interesting, challenging at times, especially at the beginning because I've been so used to just being out there in the front... I've got to really sit down and understand the needs of the students, that's really important. It can be challenging at times but it has been fulfilling because we can see them working towards the common aim of achieving two certificates. [Priya]

> I work very hard to make everyone feel part of the group. When I start I find it difficult. I don't get a lot of feedback from them ... I'm not sure if I'm getting through my points or not ... I don't have time to stand and explain everything. I have to explain course content, so that's where Priya's been excellent. She will pick up and take notes if I have mentioned something and the girls don't understand. She will take that on board and come in her session with detailed information. [Amy]

While the particular policy context of the field might have pushed Priya to work in this new way, her practice in this team-teaching context drew heavily on her own prior experience and knowledge of working with culturally diverse learners (her habitus). They enabled her to make sense of the learners' situations and experiences:

> My awareness of the Chinese culture, Indian culture and other cultures has helped me greatly, because when I teach them the language aspects I'm able to relate always to the cultural aspects. [Priya]

Along with her cultural awareness and knowledge, Priya recognised the linguistic capital held by her bilingual students. Priya gave explicit value to this capital. Students were encouraged to use their first languages in class, as she saw that this facilitated greater communication and understanding within groups of students. It enabled those more proficient in English to explain unfamiliar concepts to others and the students could more easily compare and contrast practices in the Australian VET context with those in their home country. In this way, she was encouraging and facilitating student agency. She also responded to the pressures in the external worlds on these students' lives throughout the program: listening, modifying and negotiating with learners as issues arose that impacted on their ability to attend or do follow-up work. In many ways she acted contingently, balancing multiple sets of factors both within and outside the classroom. The distribution of the linguistic resources here also helped reshape the field, especially when students were using their first languages.

The dynamic nature of the field is also reflected by the VET teacher's position also changing: Amy's dispositions as a teacher were altered, and Priya, proficient in some of the languages of the students, took up a new position. The team-teaching practice, based on a vertical hierarchy with Amy as the main teacher and Priya as the support teacher, shifted over the time of their working together. While Priya was obviously open to the changing dynamics of the field and saw some value in working with the more vocationally-orientated curriculum and the benefits that recognised (legitimated) credentials can bring to the learners, she was however uncompromising in her beliefs about teaching and sought to maintain the learners' needs as a prime driver of her practice.

In Priya's position of providing language and literacy support, what we saw was both a teacher whose own habitus was being transposed from that of the sole English language teacher to a team teacher in a VET course through the particular policy context in which she found herself, and a teacher who was contingent and keen to encourage student agency, drawing on her strong identification with different cultural groups to create new possibilities for the learners from diverse cultural backgrounds to learn, live and work in Australian society.

Creating possibilities of a new habitus for the learners

The second site of our research took us to a community youth centre where an ABE teacher, Jean, worked with an Outreach coordinator, Peter. Both Jean and Peter were experienced in teaching literacy and numeracy to a range of young and older adult learners. At this site, Jean and Peter were working with a group of young, mainly Indigenous learners who had disengaged from formal schooling. The learners were taking part in the program with the clear aim of completing school subjects and working towards gaining formal school qualifications, including their year 10 School Certificate. As discussed more fully in an earlier paper about this particular site (Chodkiewicz, Widin & Yasukawa 2010), the program at this site was one that had what Noddings (2003) would call 'moral' or internal value for the teachers and the learners, but not necessarily one that carried externally recognised value.

The program was a partnership program between two sections of a further education college and a local community youth centre, and was funded in part by a philanthropic organisation. The community youth centre was physically designed and furnished with the colours of the Australian Aboriginal flag, with an indoor basketball area, and different kinds of learning spaces to allow learners to work in different configurations according to their needs. Both teachers expressed a strong commitment to helping learners overcome the

negative experiences that most of them had encountered during their school years:

> … we actually offer an opportunity for students to come here and maintain or renege without the necessity of meeting the traditional year 7 or year 8 scheduling … so we would then say, OK, we have a student who has walked in who doesn't want to be out there on the street, who cannot survive in the normal school environment. What we will do is just facilitate their learning and promote their learning and bring them slowly back to the path of a proper education… Our key ingredient for success is you can walk in eight months into the year and we will take you in and look at your literacy, numeracy and your vocation pathway, try and establish a firm footing from which to rebuild. [Peter]

> … and some students are a little bit reticent to speak out when there's other louder kids. [We] give them a chance and encourage them to participate. [Jean]

Their practice was consistent with their expressed beliefs about teaching—the dispositions that they brought from other teaching contexts. However, their practice also had to change and they had to learn new ways of working in this context, responding to the particularities and possibilities at this site. Their dispositions were such that the learner was central to their teaching practice. In one sense, this was familiar territory for both teachers and they continued to focus on how to remain contingent and accommodate the learners' needs in this new context—one that was often impacted on directly by the learners' external world. This often meant dealing with confronting learner behaviours and trying to find ways that responded positively for the learner, other learners and themselves. This involved learning new ways of working, in particular, how to engage more fully in a partnership with each other, the learners and the volunteers, and to work with materials and approaches that were seemingly antithetical to a learner-centred approach. Another important feature of this site was that learners took on a more determining role. Initially they had requested that the centre offer a

program where they could work towards a school certificate credential and it was often their interests and concerns that were the key to the shaping of new teaching practices in this teaching site.

The teachers explained that sometimes they had to throw away the methods or theories they had learned in their teacher education diplomas 'and react in a certain way to a certain situation' [Peter]. This was because their teaching environment was impacted by the regular and on-going instabilities and pressures in the learners' lives outside the classroom. The practice of team-teaching that they were developing made a significant difference to how they coped in these situations.

> I think we work well as a team. We bring different strengths, weaknesses, also different experiences ... And I think we complement each other. It's also again a matter of trust between us. Sometimes Peter has an idea and I think I hadn't thought about that ... go with that ... give it a try and mutually like that. And I think we can also do a little division of labour now in the group. I'd be working with the students more on the literacy and numeracy, and Peter will be working more with the students doing distance ed., then we bring them all together ... I think that works pretty well. [Jean]

> I think Jean might look at me more as the deliverer sometimes, certainly Jean gives me the material to deliver ... And I think because of my experience of working with kids from this age bracket for such a long time, you can hand me something and I can just take off with it. [Peter]

Jean and Peter also talked about how they learned as a team to deal with situations when learners might arrive expressing a lot of anger and frustration. Often they were the result of extreme events that occurred in their lives outside the teaching space.

> And sometimes there's issues of anger management, too, and that's very good when we're a team ... We have little cues; ... sometimes Peter might say that we'll leave that or [we] might sort

> of have a word to one another ... I feel very supported by Peter in those situations. [Jean]

> There are times, I know, that when a student is angry with me and Jean can sense it, obviously at the same time and I can move the student towards Jean or Jean can move the student towards myself. [Peter]

We saw at this site the practicality of their teaching practice. The teachers both had a strongly articulated philosophy of teaching that was based on supporting their learners to engage productively in learning. This philosophy was translated into their practice through the relationship that they had built between the two of them, which in turn strengthened their relationships with the learners. Throughout each session in one-on-one and group work, both teachers showed a high degree of contingency in their awareness and response to student 'irruptions'. This in turn created possibilities for the learners to exercise agency and assume the kind of academic identity that they had never experienced prior to engaging in this program.

Building teaching practice from knowing the learners

The third site was an ABE class consisting of six learners being led by Ann in a course on numeracy. The class consisted of five men and one woman, whom Ann described as being very weak in their literacy and numeracy skills, some with mild learning difficulties, and who had experienced disrupted school learning. In this site, we saw how the teacher was continually shaping and reshaping her practice in response to what she was learning about her learners:

> The main thing really is to know my students, to really know and understand where they're coming from, what their learning difficulties are, where their weaknesses and their strengths are.

A few minutes before her Monday class started, we saw Ann talking to the students who were waiting outside the classroom, greeting each student by name and asking them what they had done on their weekend. During the class, she often acted contingently—looking

for and creating further opportunities for learners to exercise agency by eliciting their knowledge and experience from outside the classroom, of the concepts and skills she was teaching, for example, measurement of different kinds of quantities: time, length and temperature. In these instances, the learners revealed not just what they knew, but also who they were. This relationship legitimated the learners as valued participants in the field. A discussion about analogue versus digital clocks prompted one student, Ahmed, a recently arrived refugee from Guinea-Bissau, who had fled his homeland, spent years in a refugee camp and only recently taken up formal study, to pull out a watch and launch into a story about the very personal significance of the watch because it was a very special watch to him.

> It's a present from my dad, long time ago. That's why I keep it good. I never even wear it ... someday, I might give it to my son. [Ahmed]

Ann allowed time for Ahmed to tell this story, giving non-verbal cues of her respect for the significance of this artefact to the learner. She then walked to each of the other learners in the room to allow them to say something about their watch to the other members of the class. She then used the uncertainty shown by the last learner about the kind of watch he had to take the group back to the official curriculum of 'measuring time'. In a later stage of the same lesson, when she introduced the topic of measuring lengths, she turned to the learner Jim:

> Ann: Jim, you've done quite a lot of measurement, haven't you?
>
> Jim: Yeah, when I did my horticulture course, measuring garden beds and stuff.

Through each of these exchanges, Ann is building and testing her own knowledge about the learners in order to shape her practice to meet the learners' needs, because as she says in her interview:

I have in my head exactly what I want to do and on paper I'll have a very brief flowchart just to remind me on the areas that I want to address for the lesson and I have resources prepared for that. But I know that, once the lesson starts, the students' needs will come to the surface and their interests will start to surface and I need to go with that ... It's about being relevant and responsive to the students ... it's about being very subtle and, I suppose, gentle with the students. I think one of the really important things that underpins my teaching is the fact that I'm teaching students and I'm not teaching the syllabus. If I come from the point of view of the students, it'll all fall into place because that's the underpinning theory that I work on. [Ann]

Ann's explanation of her teaching practice reflects what Kumaravadivelu (2003:35) says about the need for a 'continual cycle of observation, reflection, and action as a prerequisite for the development of context-sensitive pedagogic theory and practice'. The coherence between Ann's espoused theory and her practice means that her theory of a learner-centred pedagogy has practical manifestations. Her pedagogy shifts the learners, in Bourdieu's terms, to a much less subordinated position in the field and affords value to the knowledge and skills they bring to the class, while at the same time creating new possibilities for the learners. From the learners' perspectives, the classroom as a field may operate in a very different way to their external worlds where they may occupy much more subordinated positions. In interviews, the learners talked about the benefits of both the self-confidence they had gained as well as the skills and knowledge that they had learned for their future—in further study, in employment and in their everyday life. And beyond the confidence, skills and knowledge that the learners were building through this course, Ann and the students were building a safe learning space in which the learners talked about each other as

... very good. We have a very friendly class, very nice people ... I'm very comfortable. [Marie]

> My classmates are really friendly people. They are very good
> people. They are very good people. So since I come to this class, I meet all these people and
> are so good for me... they're my friends. When I come to school,
> I'm happy. [Ahmed]

At this third site, what we saw was a teacher whose practice was
strongly anchored in her belief about teaching as a relational activity.
She balanced what she knew her students needed to learn (exchange
of cultural capital), and the ways they could learn, with the needs of
the syllabus. Ann's strong grounding in her particular practice, her
confidence and accumulated cultural capital allowed her to work
outside of the doxa of the field; she allowed the learners a central
position and did not feel inhibited by the more narrowly-defined,
official curriculum.

In a field with so many variables to deal with, and where events
unfold in ways that are unpredictable, it is not surprising that
inexperienced teachers may feel a lack of control over their teaching
practice. However, starting from her knowledge and work with
the learners, Ann's practice was clearly a result of the relationship
between the various capitals and habitus in the field. She was
unwilling to compromise and was clear about when and where she
could and should be flexible and responsive to her learners. This in
turn provided possibilities of a transformative learning environment,
Kumaravadivelu's third parameter, for her and her students.

Conclusion

It is axiomatic to say that the teaching field is complex and that
teachers' struggles are many. This paper has raised questions and
illustrated ways in which teachers shape and reshape practice in
the field. The adult language, literacy and numeracy classroom is a
complex field. The doxa of the field suggest that learners' goals are
narrowly defined to meet employability criteria, but many teachers
recognise the various other pressing learning and social needs that

learners present. In responding to the learners' needs, the teachers can risk being de-legitimated within their institutions.

We have shown that teachers are involved in a dynamic process of interaction with a range of inter-related elements. Teachers' learning is contingent on certain conditions—both material and not material. We contend that some teachers' habitus are better attuned to the relations in the field and hence are more able to acculturate to new circumstances. This leads us to the notions of resilience and robustness. While these have not been explored in depth here, they are clearly attributes that help teachers to maintain and sustain their practice, particularly in challenging contexts.

When a teacher's habitus is highly attuned to the field, they are as Priya, Peter, Jean and Ann demonstrate, able to respond contingently to student irruptions. These irruptions can shift or evolve into new dispositions, repositioning the agents in the field. This inevitably shifts practices. We have examined moments of opportunity offered through the students' agency and teachers' contingency. The practices that emerge are contingent on a particular response at a particular point in time.

We also saw teachers in this study engaged in struggles to continually democratise the field. In Bourdieu's terms, this is an attempt to redistribute resources and to address the symbolic violence underlying all teaching practice. The teachers drew not only on their own professional resources (capital) to support the learners, but as Priya explained, their social and linguistic capital and other cultural resources to connect with and give benefit to the learners. Ann actively drew out the resources that the learners brought with them and facilitated the redistribution of these resources in the classroom.

How is teachers' learning valued and/or legitimated? There is no formal legitimation of continued teacher learning through practice in the adult language, literacy and numeracy field. Currently, there

are no formal requirements for teachers in this field to participate in continuing professional learning. Teachers can only value this through their own internal legitimation and through their interactions with their peers. This study suggests that much of this is contained in their teaching and learning relationships with students. This means that the value has to be recreated or reactivated each time a new group of learners arrives. There is a struggle and a tension between the official notions of practice and their invocation of practice through relationship of particularity, practicality and possibility. It is also important to be mindful that this study focused on expert teachers who had the benefit of a more vibrant and connected field in its earlier days. What of the generation of teachers entering the field now, and in the future?

In this paper, we were able to examine what 'expert' teachers might be capable of, in terms of negotiating this complex terrain. Being involved in the field as teacher educators, we have vested interests to see the continuing emergence of these 'expert' teachers. We, too, have an interest in influencing the field.

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